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ABSTRACT

A booklet designed for supervisors, co-workers, and others who deal with limited-English-speaking immigrants discusses communication problems and solutions. Chapters address these issues: (1) the problems and consequences of faulty communication; (2) difficulties that result from assuming that immigrants should learn English; (3) appreciation of the common characteristics of and the differences between immigrants and immigrant groups; (4) examination of personal assumptions about immigrants and appropriate forms of communication; (5) the distinguishing features of a good communicator; (6) the usefulness of lipreading; (7) the simplification of the language for clarity; (8) clear presentation of ideas; (9) basic guidelines for effective communication; and (10) additional hints and examples for clear communication. (MSE)

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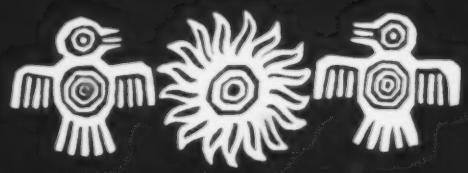

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HOW TO COMMUNICATE BETTER
WITH CLIENTS, CUSTOMERS, AND WORKERS
WHOSE ENGLISH IS LIMITED

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The text was written by Carole Chan and typed by Troy Dial.

THIS BOOKLET IS FOR YOU IF:

You supervise immigrant workers, or

You work with immigrant clients, customers, or patrons.

IF, FOR EXAMPLE:

-- You are a receptionist referring a caller, or

-- You are a customer representative taking an order for service, or

-- You are a librarian assisting a student, or

-- You are a bus driver giving directions, or

-- You are a nurse taking a medical history, or

-- You are a sales clerk answering an inquiry, or

-- You are a job supervisor making a work assignment.

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THE PROBLEM WITH FAULTY COMMUNICATION

-- It wastes time

-- It's frustrating

-- It's poor employee relations

-- It's poor customer relations

-- It's poor public relations

There's no sense in spending excess time and energy trying to understand and to be understood when it can be done faster and with better results. And poor communications can be costly. You could damage or destroy the potential for cooperation, patronage, trust, and referrals. Attempts at crosscultural communication can be awful. Or they can be fun. It is a puzzle with clues, keys, and solutions for those who look for them.

AN OBVIOUS REMEDY: IMMIGRANTS SHOULD LEARN ENGLISH, RIGHT?

Right. And almost all of them want to. Adult immigrants are eager to learn English so that they can participate in the broader community, and so that they can relate to the world that their children will grow up in.

That's why adult classes in English as a Second Language (ESL) are filled to capacity and every vacancy is immediately filled from a long waiting list. Evans Adult School in downtown Los Angeles, for instance, has a capacity of approximately 8,000 students and waiting lists totaling about 3,000.

There are long waits for early morning and late afternoon and evening sessions - before and after work. That shows a lot of motivation.

Although funding is available to assure all children a place in a school, the same is not true for adults. Funding levels for adult education are set every year, and the budget has not kept pace with the need. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 contains provisions for funding adult ESL classes. Particulars were not known at the time this booklet was written.

IN GENERAL, IMMIGRANTS ARE...

The immigrant population of Los Angeles County is largely Latin and Asian/Pacific, with a third major group from the Middle East.

In general, the native cultures of immigrants are much more conscious of hierarchies than we are. Their social structures are more strictly defined and a person's place in the group or family is

very important. It is best to be respectful of these hierarchies. When a child is translating for an adult, for instance, it is still the adult who heads the household. Address the adult, not the child. The adult may understand English much better than he or she speaks it.

The group (frequently it is the extended family) is important to most immigrants, often more important than the individual. The group typically provides support, and decisions generally involve other group members. Group members often accompany one another to appointments to lend moral support or to help in other ways.

Immigrants are more likely to focus on people than on systems. In most of their native countries, business is transacted through personal connections, and agreements can be sealed with only a word or a handshake. Newcomers are more comfortable with persons whom they have seen before, whose faces and names they know. Once you have impressed them with your willingness to assist and your knowledge of your business, they are likely to look for you in the future and to trust you.

Each culture has a concept of time and its importance. Americans are generally time-conscious. Immigrants who are not accustomed to urban living, or whose cultures are not so time-conscious, have a hard time understanding the view that "time is money." You may need to explain when and why punctuality is necessary, or what the consequences of missing a deadline are.

Some cultures are very expressive and even redundant; others practice great subtlety in language. Expressive and redundant language is easy to understand; subtleties and indirect statements tend to give us more problems.

To get the most out of an exchange with an indirect speaker takes effort. Some Asians are known for understating anything that may sound like criticism or credit-taking, or that may sound "too forward." If you want an opinion from an indirect speaker you'll have to learn to read between the lines and coax out information.

Cultures also vary in their sense of privacy and modesty. If it is necessary for you to ask questions that could be considered personal, it is best to do it with only group members present, or at least to take care that others can not overhear the conversation. It also helps to explain why it is necessary to probe into such matters.

An immigrant's self-confidence is tested constantly. The only direct request made by immigrants whom we interviewed in preparing this booklet was, "Please ask them not to laugh at me when I try to speak English."

Anyone who has been in a foreign country and, even briefly, been without a translator can sympathize. It is discouraging when his/her attempts to adjust are laughed at.

IT'S NOT A QUESTION OF RIGHT OR WRONG, JUST DIFFERENT. Immigrants know that they must adapt to American English and to American ways of doing things. Still, if we are aware of their point of view, we can use that knowledge to mutual advantage.

EXAMINE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

We all make assumptions about people. Some are probably accurate, others not. The more you know about a person and his or her experience, the better you can communicate.

If you wanted to direct a native English-speaking painter to a spot near your home, you might tell him/her that it is next to the brown patio post. If you were speaking to a plumber, you might use the sprinkler head as a reference point. For an electrician, you could say how far it is from the power pole. In these examples you are taking advantage of knowing the other person's experience and point of view.

Immigrant Americans vary in their experience with Western culture, urban life, and with our language. Immigrants from urban centers, for instance, may have had regular encounters with government. They might have confidence in government, or they might fear it. They may have confidence or fear about their language skills, too. Some immigrants are already bilingual; English makes them trilingual.

Some have excellent English grammar, extensive vocabularies, and heavy accents. Others never learned to write in their native language.

You could use plumber language to talk to a electrician; but you'd get further using electrician language.

HOW TO SPOT A GOOD COMMUNICATOR

The distinguishing feature of any good communicator is active listening. He/she puts as much energy into watching and listening as into talking.

Our interview subjects said they can tell who will be easy to talk to by their faces. They smile and look interested.

Patient listeners have the advantage over impatient listeners. They can get better information because the newcomer will not feel pressured, and can better remember recently-learned words. People who show ill-will find communication slower and more frustrating because, as immigrants tell us, "When they are rude, I get nervous."

Smile, be friendly, but be cautious about using humor. Humor differs among cultures, and it is hard for newcomers to understand. What we consider a bit of light banter may be puzzling to an immigrant.

Have you ever heard two immigrants from different cultures talking together? It's amazing. Although both have to translate their thoughts into English and then use English to speak to the other, although they have to listen to English spoken with an accent different from their own, they can communicate beautifully. Immigrants whom we interviewed told us that the key to their success is motivation. They each appreciate the struggle that the other is going through, and each knows that the other will not belittle his/her effort.

LIPREADING

English is a lot easier for newcomers to decipher if they can see your face and especially your lips as you speak. It's something like lipreading. Newcomers avoid using the phone. When they can't see you, they also can't "read" non-verbal cues. Some would rather take a bus for an in-person conversation than struggle with a conversation by phone.

Tape recordings and answering machines are worse yet. The listener can't lipread, he/she can't ask the speaker to slow down, or to explain further, and he or she must respond before time runs out or the voice-activated answering machine stops.

WHEN LESS IS BETTER

Speak slowly. Speak clearly. And stick to the main points.

When you speak with another native English speaker you probably throw in a lot of extra words without even realizing it. This may be from habit, or it may provide interesting detail. For someone just learning to speak English, however, these side comments only make it harder to sort out the important points.

Listen carefully to conversations around you. You'll hear a lot of extra clauses, phrases, and words that you should delete when speaking with a newcomer. For example: "you know?" "at this point in time," "the reason for it is...," "presently," "the question as to whether," "in a timely manner," "call your attention to the fact that...," "in terms of," "hopefully."

Stick to the main points, keep sentences simple, but don't limit yourself to certain words. It's much better if you use a variety of simple words to say the same thing. It increases the chances that some of your words will be clearly understood. You'll learn to recognize the quick and firm positive reaction that says, "I understand exactly what you mean." You'll be able to tell between that real feedback and nervous nodding that newcomers sometimes use when they are too embarrassed to admit that they do not understand.

A GOOD PLACE TO START

SAY WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO, DO IT, AND THEN RECAP WHAT YOU DID.
In some instances it is worth the time to tell the immigrant what you are going to do ("I'm going to ask you some questions about..."), then do it, and then tell him or her what you have done, ("We have completed this application...").

SAY WHAT YOU AGREE ON, THEN DISCUSS WHAT YOU DON'T AGREE ON.
Another effective approach is to first verify background information, and then move to areas of disagreement or confusion.

For example, imagine you are a grocery clerk. An immigrant brings a tube of toothpaste to your check stand and hands you a coupon for 50¢ off. Using this approach you would begin by saying, "This coupon is for 50¢ off on the 8.2 ounce tube of toothpaste," (you point to wording on coupon). "This tube is 6.4 ounces" (you point to the printing on the box). "You can not use this coupon on this size tube." "Would you like the larger 8.4 ounce size?"

This technique breaks the discussion down, rather than lumping everything into a single sentence. What if you had said only, "This coupon isn't good for this tube of toothpaste"? Some newcomers would understand as readily as non-immigrants. For newcomers with more limited English skills and experience, however, the step-by-step approach can save time and avoid misunderstandings.

Make use of feedback. Tell the other person what you think he or she said, and give him or her a chance to correct any misunderstanding before it is used to draw conclusions.

START WITH THE GENERAL, MOVE TO THE SPECIFIC.
"All cars must have a smog check every two years." "Your car was checked two years ago." "It will need to be checked again this year." Imagine if you had made only the last statement. If your listener didn't know that all cars must be checked every two years, wouldn't he or she wonder why the car must be checked again?

BASIC DO'S

Here are the basics of effective communication with limited-English speakers. You may want to use these for quick reference when you have a problem.

-- Let the newcomer see your lips as you speak.

-- Smile.

-- Be aware of your assumptions.

-- Don't rush. Be patient.

-- Listen carefully.

-- Speak a little more slowly than usual, but <u>not</u> more loudly.

-- Be careful with your pronunciation.

-- Stick to the main points.

-- Emphasize the key words.

-- Control your vocabulary. Avoid jargon, such as, "the computer is down," "back issues are on fiche," "this is a promo," "take the flyer." Also avoid slang and difficult words.

-- Use simple sentence structure.

-- Make your statements, instructions and inquiries as specific as possible.

-- Make your statement in a variety of ways, to multiply the chances of getting the thought across.

-- Keep pencil and paper handy. Use them when spoken words aren't working. And use them to write key information.

-- Watch for responses that indicate real understanding.

-- Use body language to illustrate what your words say. Invent a vocabulary of gestures. But be sure the gestures you use have the same meaning in the immigrant's culture. Sometimes the meaning is the opposite of ours.

-- Avoid contractions.

-- Avoid idioms. Remember them? They're expressions that have a meaning

from the literal meaning, like "left holding the bag."

-- Use the vocabulary that the immigrant has used. They are words that he or she understands.

-- Offer to spell words that the newcomer appears to have trouble grasping.

-- Ask the immigrant to spell or write down any words that you have trouble understanding.

-- Say what you're going to do, do it, and then recap what you did.

-- Say what you agree on, then discuss what you don't agree on.

-- Give general information before dealing with specific issues.

MORE HINTS AND EXAMPLES

-- Vocabulary: Be careful of those hard words that have crept into our work vocabulary, such as "verify," "confirm," "determine," "finalize," and "update."

-- Point to sections of written instructions or forms as you discuss them. If you are a supervisor, follow up your oral instructions by posting a reminder on the bulletin board.

-- Write out key information such as where to go and when, rather than expect the newcomer to remember them by sound only.

-- Don't ask if an immigrant has questions; he or she is likely to say "no" rather than admit to not understanding. Instead, try asking which information they have trouble understanding. Or ask them to confirm what you said by repeating it to you.

-- Avoid words, questions, or statements that imply a negative, such as "barely," "scarcely," "doesn't generally," "I don't suppose...," "didn't you...." Positive questions and statements are more concise and easier to understand.

-- Avoid questions that may have complicated answers or lead to questions in response. For example, the answer to the question, "Do you care if I borrow this book?" may depend on: 1) why you want it, 2) how long you want to keep it, 3) whether you want to take it home, and other factors.

-- Use the active voice. It's more concise. "The landlord told me...," rather than "I was told by the landlord."

-- When you can't find just the right word to say what you want to say, try using descriptions and examples. One ESL student told us of the time when she couldn't recall the word "manners." She asked her friend, "What is the word for when someone is nice and thoughtful, and

holds the door open for a lady, and says 'please' and 'thank you'?" From that description her friend knew the word she wanted.

Another student told us, "I don't give up. I know that if I keep talking, I can make them understand me, even if I don't know the English words for it."

-- Try to figure out the characteristics of different accents. You already know that Germans say "vord" for "word," the French say "whiz" for "with," and the Japanese say "Engrish" for "English." Vietnamese with accented English say "sop" for "shop" and tend to drop final consonant sounds off the ends of words. "Twelve" comes out "twel." Broaden your listening vocabulary and communications will improve.

-- There are some words that are easier for newcomers to understand even if they are not simple or common from our point of view. For example, we are more likely to say "mistake" rather than "error." Yet "error" sounds so much like the parallel Spanish word that a Latino would recognize it. The same is true of "difficult" for "hard," and "superior" for "better." You may find it interesting to collect and use such words.

-- Other substitute words may be effective in writing for immigrants, although the English pronunciation of the words may be quite different from the newcomers' native language pronunciation. For

example, Latinos may recognize "rapid," but not "fast"; "repair," rather than "fix"; "correct" rather than "right."

-- Other languages also have words that communicate better than more ordinary English words. Someone with French background, (including some Southeast Asians) would understand the word "ameliorate" more readily than "improve." If you enjoy crossword puzzles and the like, you can apply that interest to crosscultural communication.

-- Differences among languages can cause unintended offenses and misunderstandings. Some languages, for instance, have only one third person pronoun, so an immigrant may say "she" when referring to a man. Or an immigrant may sound demanding by saying "you should..." because his/her native language doesn't have words for "could," "might," "may." So if the immigrant's statement seems not to fit the situation, use other words to clarify and get around language differences to find the intended meaning.

# # #

Well, that's it, communicators. Good luck. Remember: the most important element in successful communication is motivation. The fact that you've taken the time to read this booklet indicates that you are motivated. The rest is fun. It's a game where everyone is a winner.